image
1
4.95
7.95
CAN

# ARIA

## A Midwinter's Dream

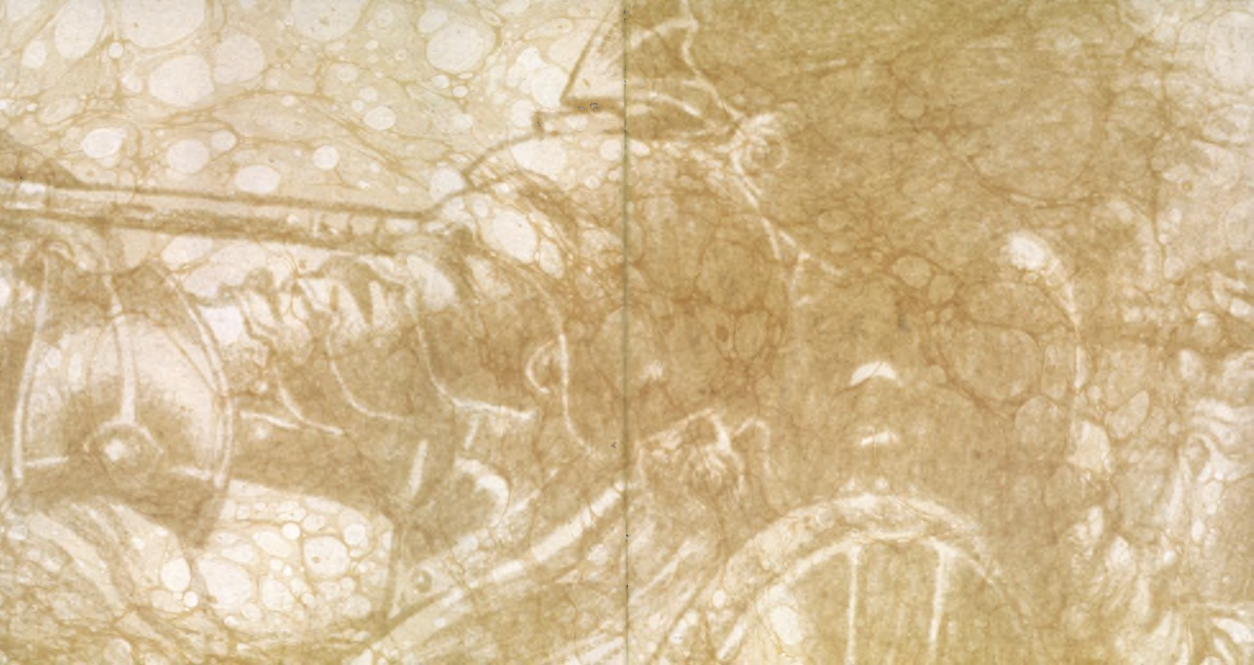


**Image** *comics presents*

# ARIA

## *A Midwinter's Dream*

*by Brian Holguin*
*Illustrations by Jay Anacleto.*

*design by Dave Pentz*
*edited by Brian Haberlin*

ARIA *created by Brian Haberlin & Brian Holguin*

*for image comics*
*Jim Valentino Publisher*
*Doug Griffith Art Director*
*Traci Hale Controller*
*Eric Stephenson Director of Marketing*
*Brent Braun Director of Production*
*Cyndie Espinoza Accounting Asst.*
*Sean O'brien Inventory Controller*

ARIA: A MIDWINTER'S DREAM Vol. 1, #1, January 2002. FIRST PRINTING. Published by Image Comics Inc. Office of Publication: 1071 N. Batavia St. Ste. A Orange, CA 92867. $4.95 US/$7.95 Canada.


ARIA: A MIDWINTER'S DREAM its logo and all related characters are trademark and copyright Haberlin Studios 2002. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Any similarities to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. With the exception of artwork used for review purposes, none of the contents of this book may be reprinted without the express written consent of Haberlin Studios. PRINTED IN CANADA.

# KILDARE'S TALE

## *Chapter*

# I

The countryside surrounding the chateau at Villa Deodati was dusted sugar white, the sky cloaked in soft gray bolts of fog that wafted in off of Lake Geneva.

The party roared inside, hearty souls warmed by drink and hearth fire, when the doors of the south wing burst open. Kildare, laughing a pirate's laugh, ran barefoot out into the snow, a bottle of claret clutched in one hand. She was followed by the party's host, a wicked poet armed with brandy and mistletoe.

"You'll never catch me," Kildare shouted over her shoulder.

"Ah!" said the Englishman. "The bootless cry of one who desperately dreams of being caught."

Kildare spun and faced her pursuer, her arms stretched out in a gesture of mock surrender.

"What shall you do with me, milord? Have me stuffed and mounted? Pinned to a board and placed under glass?"

"Something rather like that, I think."

The Englishman came towards her, slowed slightly by the lameness in his right leg. Kildare stood waiting in the snow, hands linked behind her back now, eyes closed, lips pursed for a kiss. But when he came within a yard or two, she whirled around and dashed into

the woods.

"You mad little thing," he shouted as her wild laughter echoed in the distance. He considered for a moment whether or not to follow. At last he turned and walked back towards the house, to other, easier prey.

She was of a race apart from that of man, a golden child of story and fable. Sea-green eyes and gold-spun hair, with the face of an

angel and the heart of a lion. She was born long ago among the spiraling towers and dream-scaped gardens of Far Lands. But she loved this world more than any other. Loved its whims and caprices, its varied climes and seasons. No other world could hold so many surprises, she often thought.

She ventured farther into the wood, a gentle snowfall tickling her face. Twirling like a child, arms outstretched, her laughter shook the tree branches. When she paused, the steam of her breath rising in front of her, she thought she could her the winds whisper back to her. She looked around. Ahead, in a small clearing, someone was standing there, like a wisp of moonlight. A man. He was young, or certainly looked young. He stood still as the air. Eyes pale as ice, hair like winter straw, skin like flawless ivory. He saw her, smiled faintly for a moment and was gone.

The trees around her quaked gently, alive with distant music. They seemed to call to her, their branches like beckoning fingers. As she followed the Pale Stranger into the hollow, she noted the only footprints on the ground were hers.

She neared the clearing. Snowflakes cascaded down around her, dancing in slow motion. Each one like a tiny prism, casting glittering colors onto the white canvas of the world. It grew so bright that she could barely see. Then, after a while, the snowfall parted like an opera curtain and she entered his Kingdom.

He stood in the middle of a great hall, which seemed carved from crystal ice and frozen air. He was dressed in clothes of silver, blue and white and bent gently at the waist, bowing to his guest.

"Welcome," said the Pale Stranger. The word seemed to come not from his mouth but from all around her, from every direction at once.

Kildare curtseyed and thanked him.

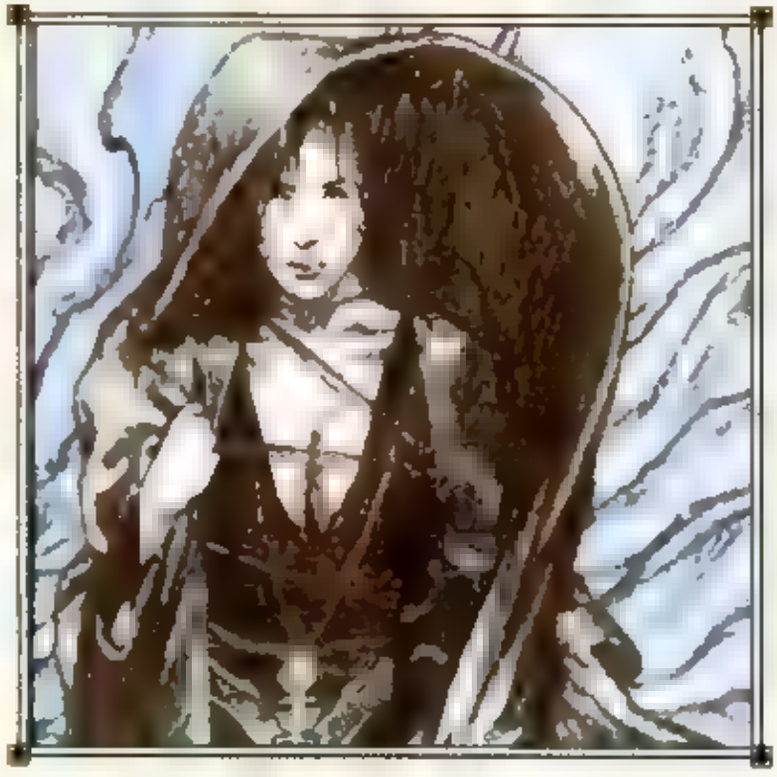
He stepped forward and extended his hand to her. She took it. It was cool and soft, like running water. He drew her to him and

together they fell into a gentle waltz, moving around the hall. Slow and tentative and first, music rose up from the air as they stepped, rising in time as they fell into a comfortable rhythm. His eyes held hers as they danced round the room, the sun and the moon, orbiting each other in celestial perfection.

In her time, she had known many men, rich and poor, mortal and otherwise, who spirited young maids off to their own humble kingdoms. It was a hunt as old as time. Bluebeards and Princes Charming, Beasts and Benefactors. But he was like none of them. He said little and asked nothing of her. Offered no promises and asked none in return.

He showed her around the Tower of Frosts, which rose high into the cold gray clouds. He walked her through the moonlit gardens where white roses climbed the tower walls and silver orchids bloomed in the night. He did his best to make her comfortable. In the great hall there was a fireplace that burned without fuel, and he sat her down beside it and served her hot wine. He told her to make herself at home, to wander freely around the grounds.

She felt different here than she ever had in any of the places she had traveled. Suspended on the edge of a breath, half in and half out of the lands we know. Time moved differently, or perhaps didn't move at all. She felt a stillness she had never known, and yet a quickening as well. Perhaps this is what the bare trees know, she thought. Or the cold stones blanketed beneath the snow. Floating,



weightless like a dream, like a lazy cloud. Yet anchored to the heart of the world.

Or perhaps this was how Heaven felt.

Kildare drained the cup of wine and drew the Pale Stranger to her side.

She cupped his face with her warm hands and they kissed. His touch was cold yet somehow warmed her flesh. They sank into one another, fingers moving with glacial slowness. Soft as a sigh, powerful as oceans, they moved together, two passing clouds,

exchanging gentle thunders.

Afterwards, she stretched out in front of a fire, muscles languid and flushed with the memory of his touch. She closed her eyes. Can one dream within a dream she thought?

When she woke, she was alone. She wandered the Tower of Frosts, she scaled the highest steps, and looked out from the highest window. From there she could see the lands we know, but they looked somehow different. A shadow, a phantasm of what she knew to be true. Ghostly, like fragments from a pleasant dream which is forgotten upon waking. Her old life seemed so distant from her now.

She idled away her days in the Tower. The Pale Stranger would leave her for long stretches of time, only to return without a word and lie by her side. She found that she did not mind the solitude. She spent the season in his company, in the walls of his garden. Sometimes she thought him a bit sad, a prisoner of some cold and sterile land. But that wasn't the case. This world was subtle and slow, but alive in its own ways .

One night, she went walking alone in the Garden. As she admired a certain rose, white as snow in the moonlight, she pricked her finger on the vine. It surprised her to see her own blood trickling from her finger, to see anything so warm and richly colored in this pale kingdom. The rose, for all its beauty, wilted in her hand, its petals falling limp to the ground.

It seemed things do change in this strange land, she thought. Sometimes, in the highest spire of the tower, as she looked out across the distant world, she could her whispers. Voices, soft and ethereal, that uttered no words but spoke just the same. Perhaps they were ghosts, phantoms of the Pale Stranger's former mistresses. Ghosts of those who had come to dance away a season or a year or a lifetime, and then departed to wander the skies forever, soaring on the wings of zephyrs.

From the highest window, she could see the world awakening with the slow, steady greening of the land. Even in the tower of frosts, the clouds seemed less leaden and gray.

Things indeed were changing.

He came to her that evening, and walked her to a bridge that spanned the distant clouds.

"I must be going soon," he told her. "Will you come?"

She looked in to his eyes, pale and still.

"If I go, can I return?" she asked.

He shook his head no.

"I see" was all she said.

That night, they danced one last time, circling around the great hall. She knew she would miss this strange music, this strange world of stillness and quiet. But it was not her world and she did not belong.

He stood at the bridge and they said their good-byes. She kissed him one last time, and a single tear escaped from her eye, freezing like a diamond as it fell. And then she turned to go.

What marvels lie on the other side of that bridge she would always wonder, and there would be times she would regret not crossing its span. But the world was waking from its Winter Dream and she must wake with it. Twelve weeks she spent in the Pale Kingdom, time which passed in a heartbeat, in an eternity.

She stepped out of the hollow into the mottled green-leaf light of

the woods. Everything was so alive, so filled with light and sound and scent. And so she walked out into the world again, into the springtime of the year, the earth waking from a well-earned slumber.

She smiled as the sunlight kissed her cheek, welcoming her home. It was good to be back. There is so much yet to be done.

# THE PUG'S TALE

## *Chapter*

# II

The world spun into a blur, white snow and blue sky pin-wheeling before my eyes. Well then, I thought. This could be it. This just might be the one that kills me…

It was still light out when I came to, hanging upside down, head pounding like a bastard. The whole world smelled of petrol, engine oil and pine needles. I ran a quick check of my limbs - all present and accounted for, all in working order for the most part. So far, so good. I unstrapped myself and fell face first into a foot of snow. I scrambled to my feet and took a couple of steps back to survey the damage.

The sky overhead was clear and silent. The Gerrie's had left us for dead apparently. Fair enough. The plane looked like a bit of paper, crumpled up and singed around the edges, chucked out in the snow. Dangling from the rear cockpit, still strapped in his shoulder harness, was the body of Lt. Lawrence Mills Braddock, RAF, three bullet wounds across his chest.

Bad luck, Bradders. You didn't deserve this.

Now, soaring over Europe in a ridiculous flying contraption whilst other blokes in similar conveyances do their very best to shoot you out of the skies might seem a daft way to make a living, but it beats the hell out of slogging it in the trenches with those poor sods up at the front. And Bradders was a pleasant enough fellow. Young.

Twenty-four or twenty-five, maybe. Welsh. A wife and baby back home. I wouldn't have a bad word to say about him if it wasn't for the truly evil thing he did the week before.

We had been playing cards in the base canteen. Absolute crap at cards, Bradders was. Good thing he was broke. He'd have lost a fortune if he'd had one. Anyway, one of the other airmen - some redheaded bastard aptly named Cox - was nattering on about how he didn't mind dying, he just didn't want to be shot down over the sea or somewhere where they couldn't find him. Wanted

to be carried back to some little piss-stain of a town and buried next to the moldering bones of his dear old mum.
Bollocks, says I. The earth swallows you wherever you fall. Don't make no difference to her, shouldn't make any to you. Waste of time and effort. Leave me where I lie, thank you very much.
And then Bradders did it. He opened his big mouth.
"Well, Pugsy," he said, drawing desperately for a Jack he was never going to get. "I'd carry your sad carcass home on my back all the way from China if I had to. That's a promise."
"Don't bother," I told him. And I meant it, too.
But he just grinned like a Welshman and repeated himself. "On my very own back, I would. Swear on my soul. What mates are for, aye?"
Worst part of it was, the silly sod meant it. Every blasted word. Damn you, Bradders. Why'd you have to go and say an awful thing like that?

I stripped some canvas from the plane and I wrapped him up nice as you please. I was going to have to drag his arse back to England, it looked like. Now, to be honest, I didn't have much of a clue where I was. Somewhere in France I figured, but I wasn't even sure about that. All I could see was the snow-covered ground, stretching out smooth and level in all directions. I figured the best thing to do was follow the sun, head west, and hope I didn't get my head blown off.
And so I set off, dragging Bradders' cold dead bones behind me. Must have looked like Father Bleeding Christmas, out on his yearly rounds. It was getting near dark when the wind picked up. Soon, it

was snowing. Light at first, then heavy. I was about to give up and leave Bradders behind when I saw it, half covered with snow. An old stone bridge.

It wasn't much, but it was something. Bridges mean roads. Roads mean people. People mean food. And food, often as not, means drink. Any complications beyond that, I wasn't really willing to consider. I figured I would tuck Bradders and myself under the bridge and wait for the snow to ease up. Then I would go looking for something passing for civilization.

The gale was really picking up as I dragged my parcel

under the bridge. I could hear a cracking beneath my feet, like some great egg hatching. And then for the second time that day, I tumbled down on my arse.

We dropped maybe 20 feet and landed hard. It was dark, but that doesn't bother me. I see fine in the dark, like a cat. There was a cavern which stretched a dozen yards in the distance and then veered to the right. And sitting in middle of this hole, very nearly as surprised as me, was one very big, very ugly Troll.

He was 10 feet tall or more. It was hard to tell because he was so hunched over. He was gaunt and sinewy, his skin a sick, pale gray, his yellow eyes sunken and weary.

"Hullo?" he said.

"Sorry 'bout that," I said. "Took a bit of a tumble. Didn't mean to bother you."

He stepped forward, unfolding himself as he moved. He must have been a fearful sight in his day. His head lolled around on his neck as he sized up first me then Bradders, who had rolled half way out of his wrapping. The Troll stood still for a moment, saying nothing. He took another step forward, puffing up his chest a bit. My hand reached round back for my revolver. Then he spoke, slowly, like a brain-damaged child.

"I have… a… RIDDLE," he said.

Trolls and their bloody riddle games. Could someone explain this to me, please?

"Sorry, mate. Don't have the time. No offense."

"I have a riddle," he repeated, making it clear I was to play along whether I wanted to or not.

"I'm just not much of a fan of riddles. Honestly."
"It's an easy one."
"All the same…"
"What am I…?"
"I'd rather not…"
"What am I thinking… in my head? Right now?"
I leveled the gun at his head and ventured a guess: "Same thing as me, I'd wager. You're wondering if a bullet would make it through your skull."

He was quiet so long, I half thought he'd forgotten about

me.

"Right. Very good. You win."

"Great. Now, if you could just give us a boost, we'll be on our way."

He pointed at Bradders. "You must leave that one."

"Why's that?"

"Going to eat him."

"Afraid I can't allow that."

"Got to eat somebody."

Truth is, he had a point. I mean, Troll or not, at least he was alive. Bradders, on the other hand, was stone cold dead. And I really didn't feel like fighting a Troll, no matter how sickly, just for the privilege of dragging a corpse around the continent. Still, I could hear his voice, swearing he'd do the same for me. Bastard.

"I can't. I wish I could. But I just can't. Sorry."

"You going to eat him? Fine. Just leave me a leg."

"No. It's not like that. He's a mate, you know? A friend."

"I've got treasure…"

That got my attention. As much as I'm sure the Widow Braddock would love to give her dearly departed husband a proper Christian funeral, I think she'd be happier with a king's ransom to keep her clothed and fed.

"Lead on McDuff," says I.

He led me to the end of the cave where it turned and then down a side tunnel. There it opened again into a great, glittering chamber. I couldn't believe my eyes. The cave was stuffed with gold and jewels, a fortune that would make a Pope blush.

"Christ! Where'd you get this?" I asked.
"My mother's."
Great. Grendel has a mother. That's just brilliant.
"Expecting her home any time soon?" I inquired, pleasant as can be.
The troll looked rather sad and shook his head no.
"I'll make you a deal," I told him. "Give me a chance to find you something to eat. I come back with some food and you let me and my friend go. If I can't find anything, you can buy him off me. Fair enough?"

"How long?"
"Give me an hour."
I should have just made a run for it, treasure or no treasure. Still, I'm usually one to keep my word. Terrible habit, I know. I ran like a madman, combing the roadside for anything that could possibly pass for Troll food. Believe it or not, it didn't take me long. Tripped right over it, in fact. A horse. Or what had been a horse, God knows how long ago. The left back leg was broken, sticking out at an angle. Frozen through and through. I almost killed myself dragging it back to the bridge. I shoved it down the hole and tossed myself in after it.
Come on, Bradders. Time to get you home.
Trouble was, Bradders was dangling by a leg, one foot crammed in the Troll's gaping maw.
"What the hell are you doing?" I shouted.
He shrugged. "Got hungry."
"You said you'd wait. You said an hour!"
"How long is that?"
What was I thinking? Trusting a Troll to keep time. Still, this was over the line. I'd reached my limit.
"You shouldna' done that, mate. You really shouldn't have. We had a deal. I can't just let you get away with this. You understand what I'm saying?"
He nodded yes, but I'd bet any amount of money he hadn't a clue.

I must say, I couldn't believe my luck when I spotted the scout plane the next day. I was even more surprised when it turned out to be one of ours. Soon, Bradders was off on his way, off to

be planted in the green hills of home. Minus his right foot and a good bit of shin, mind you, but with a small fortune wrapped up tight in his boot. A little something to help Mrs. Braddock ease herself into widowhood.

Sleep well, Bradders, you old bastard. I did the best I could.

Happy Christmas.

# ONDINE'S SONG

## *Chapter*

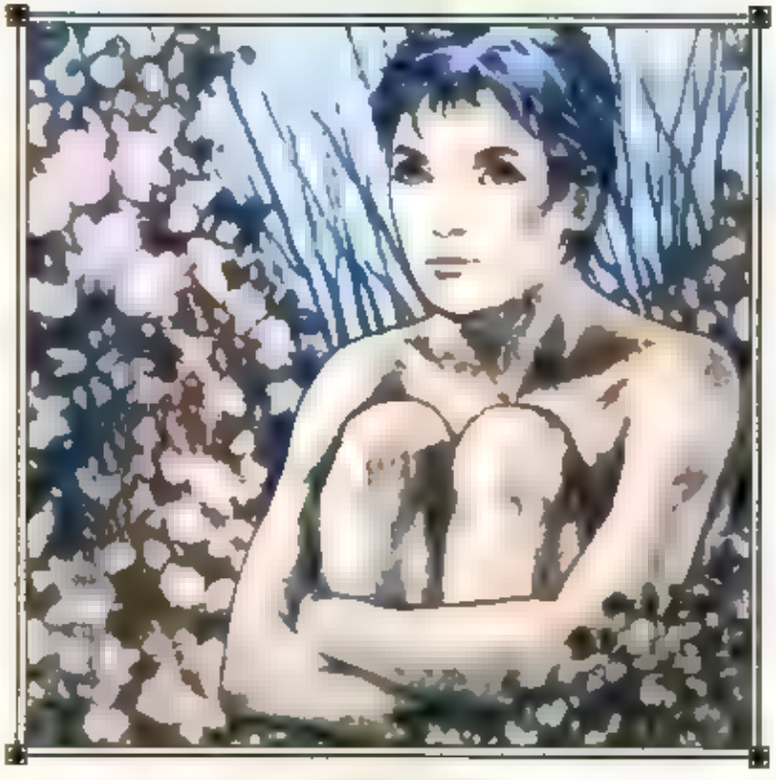
# III

We sleep in the winter. In distant snow-capped mountains
And silent frozen lakes.
Or we sun ourselves in pale sands of Greek islands
And float above the world on soft white clouds.
Waiting for the first touch of spring.
For the sun to kiss our brow and bid us, "Awaken."

My sisters and I, we come alive,
Trilling gently down mountain slopes,
Carving great ruts in granite hills.
Drop by drop, we move towards the sea,
Back to the Mother of All Things.
And as we greet each other, kiss each other's cheeks, we sing.

The song goes out, across the world,
In ripples on ponds and in drops of rain
In the quaking dew drops on broad, green lawns.
A thousand voices joined as one.
Soon they hear it, and come to us.
Seek us out from every port

Old sailors who dream of depthless slumbers
Of the ancient, sunken cities hidden within our eyes.
Dreamers and poets, they heed the tide and come to us.
To drown with our name upon their blue lips, smiling.
To swap a soul for a moment's passing bliss.
Winter has gone.
We are awake again.



# LORD ZEPHON'S TALE

## *Chapter*

# IV

*Wulf-Monath.* That is what the Saxon tribes called the month we know as January. The Moon of the Wolf. A lean and hungry time, when the world sleeps warm beneath bone white covers.

In the cities, men and women huddle indoors, warm themselves by coal fire and drink toasts to absent friends. Fat from their holidays, they set their thoughts towards the year ahead. To business unfinished, and promises yet to be kept. It is a time of new beginnings.
"Here's to your good fortune, my friend."
"Thank you. And to yours as well."
Days, they may venture out into the snow, where children play and men do what work they can. But at night, they bar the door and turn their backs on the world outside.
Outside, there are wild things.

I step out into the cold night, naked beneath the Wolf Moon. My eyes sharpen in the darkness, pupils lengthen into black slits. One moment my body is cold and pink, covered in goose-flesh. The next it is warmed by thick, bristly hair. My bones shift and reshape themselves. I step out of one body into another, and I am my second self.
Gray fur and yellow fang.
Sharp ears and padded feet.
I am alive.
I head out into the countryside.
Out where the wild things are.

I let loose a howl. Deep and feral, a primal shout that shifts the plates of continents. It reverberates through my elongated throat, more eloquent than any word I ever spoke as a man.

The Wolf Moon smiles down on me and I run.

From miles off, my call is returned. Soon it is joined by another voice. And another. The howling goes out from hill to hill, all across England. Farmers bolt their shutters and inn-keepers peer out window curtains and cross themselves before putting another log on the fire.

"Good bless us and keep us safe," they say.

We are here to remind them. Those who won't stray from the fire-light,

who won't peer into the shadows. There is still savagery in this world. It is a wild place into which they are born.

The hunt begins.
I see it mere seconds before it sees me. The stag, white and noble, its broad horns like the horns of the moon, wheels towards the woods and takes flight. I give chase.
My brothers soon join me. I can hear their panting breath beside me, smell the adrenalized musk of the pack. We move as one beneath the moon, a gray-black shadow gliding across the silver landscape.
There is no anger in our pursuit. No vengeance, no pity. It is merely what we are. Over hill and stream, through wood and valley, we run.The stag gives us a good chase, but at last is felled. We bark out our respect, a wild prayer for that which is about to nourish us.
We are on him, draining the warm life from him. Fang into flesh, claw into bone. This is a holy act, a sacrament. A wild communion old as time.
There is but one great truth in this great world: Life feeds on life. And tonight we are kings of the feast.

After the feed, we go our separate ways. We are solitary things, each a country unto itself. I walk slowly now, drinking in the world through primal senses. The earth, cold beneath my padded feet. The air, alive with a thousand delicious scents. I can feel the hum of the world as it turns and hurtles across the dark sea of space.
There is no joy. No pride. Only life, swelling to the brim and pouring over. In the distance I can see the lights of the town, where men shudder at the sound of my cry and curse the devil that walks the roads tonight.
Once more, I howl.

In time, the Moon will wane. I will return, back to my other life, to my

civilized self. Back to a world of drawing rooms and idle gossip, of steam engines and starched white collars. But I will know the world for what it is. For all the iron bands with which man has girded the globe, it is still a wild place. All the marble and cobblestone in creation cannot mask it.

And one evening, as I sit sipping brandy in a leather chair, poring over The Times, I will glance out my window, out at the distant hills, painted in silver washes of moonlight. And I will remember this night.

And deep in my heart, I will howl.

Pass through the veil of twilight to visit the fantastic world of ARIA, a world where fairy princesses and creatures of ancient myth walk unnoticed through the streets of our modern world.

Featuring four magical, unforgettable tales, woven together into a single, magnificent tapestry, this special stand-alone edition provides glimpses into the secret lives of Lady Kildare, Pug, Ondine and others as you've never seen them before.

This collection is an ideal primer for readers new to the series, and a welcome addition for long-time fans.

DIRECT SALES
00111
7 09853 16405 0